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Inner-City Youth Development Organizations: Strengthening Programs for Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

The challenges of early adolescence are intensified for girls of color who live in disadvantaged urban communities. One response to the needs of these girls comes from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA), a youth development organization that has a long-standing presence in inner-city neighborhoods. A gender equity initiative designed to strengthen programming for minority girls at a BGCA affiliate in a major urban center was examined. Drawing on initial qualitative findings, a conceptual framework is presented for understanding the ways in which the clubs can affect urban early adolescent girls' self-esteem. Several strategic choices confronting this initiative then are considered. The authors emphasize the creation of a "home place" that enables the development of self via organizational responsiveness to girls' voices, strong bonds between girls and staff, adaptive peer friendship cliques, and the development of programs that fuse the interests of girls and adult staff.

Factors associated with poverty, minority status, and inner-city life make early adolescence an especially challenging period for many urban girls. Developmental needs must be addressed in an environment often characterized by prejudice, poor schools, limited future job prospects, violence, stressful family life, and fewer positive adult role models (Leadbeater & Way, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Musick, 1993; Spencer & Dornbusch, 1990).

The ways in which the self develops in these contexts is an important issue. The few studies that have been conducted with early adolescent, inner-city girls have found mixed results. Simmons and Blyth (1987) reported a decline in global self-esteem among White Milwaukee girls during the transition from elementary school to junior high school and from junior high to high school. Much less well known are their findings that African American girls from their overall sample reported increased self-esteem over these very same transitions (Simmons, Brown, Bush, & Blyth, 1978). This would be consistent with qualitative research findings that urban, minority girls, in contrast to middle class White girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), are able to maintain their "voice" (Fordham, 1996; J. Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Way, 1998). On the other hand, a more recent study of early adolescent school transitions found a decline in self-esteem among poor African American and Latino youth in three major East Coast cities (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). There is also some question as to whether reports of high self-esteem among African American girls fail to take into account the complexity of their responses to disadvantaged minority status (Robinson & Ward, 1991).

The present research with inner-city girls addressed the development of self within the context of youth development organizations. To appreciate the distinctive role of such settings, several aspects of the girls' environment must be considered. Above all else, there is the issue of physical safety. These girls lived in neighborhoods that often were extremely dangerous. Many had lost friends and relatives to gang violence, crime, and substance abuse by the time they entered high school. For many adolescents, school usually is considered a safe place, but it often is not in urban districts. The pervasive threat of violence and, in some schools, the presence of metal detectors, locked-off areas, and constant demand for identification can make girls experience the school as more of a prison, and themselves as part of the prison population (Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996). Spaces in which girls feel, and are, safe are essential to actualize differing aspects of the self (Maslow, 1968).

School for these youth, moreover, often is contested territory where academic success can translate into accusations from peers of "acting white" (Fordham, 1996). Poor minority girls, in addition, sometimes receive little familial recognition and support for academic achievements (Fordham, 1996; Way, 1998). Thus, competence in schoolwork does not lead necessarily to enhanced self-esteem, as it typically would for youth in more privileged communities.

Where neighborhood and school do not provide safety, youth development organizations become especially important because they can provide a haven where the self can be developed and supported. Workers in these organizations have asserted that an important part of their role is to undo the negative influence of school on adolescent self-esteem (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Youth development organizations typically are staffed by individuals who are connected to the community in which the children and adolescents are growing up. They are often community members who have dedicated themselves to supporting youth by providing them with safe, positive recreational, learning, and work opportunities.

Supervised after-school programs, school-age child care programs, and institutions like the YMCA/YWCA, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) have provided support to young people for several generations. Involvement with these types of programs has been associated with successful academic and personal outcomes for high-risk young people (Pittman & Wright, 1991; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). Although relatively few programs have been evaluated rigorously, those that appear most effective provide long-term services, are modeled on a developmental rather than a deficit framework, and emphasize the formation of caring adult-youth relationships (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998).

The present research focused on a regional affiliate of the BGCA. The BGCA has been one of the leading youth development organizations in the United States throughout the 20th century. In contrast to other organizations, such as the YMCA, YWCA, and Scouts, the BGCA consistently has maintained a significant focus on poor, urban youth in a nonreligious context. The BGCA currently serves nearly 3 million boys and girls across the United States in more than 2,000 facilities. Approximately 70% of youth served by the BGCA live in urban or inner-city areas; 56% are from minority families, and slightly more than one-half are from single-parent families. Nationwide, approximately 40% of BGCA youth are girls (see <http://www.bgca.org>).

Although the national organization officially incorporated girls in 1990, and some sites did so earlier, programs for girls often are underdeveloped. The involvement of the present researchers arose when a regional affiliate of the BGCA launched an ambitious effort to strengthen programs for girls. This effort is designed to include multiple strategies and

levels of action, including development of new programs and activities for girls, staff training in gender equity, liaison with women's community groups and social service agencies oriented toward girls, and gender-equitable personnel policies. Early adolescent girls are a particular focus of this initiative because in the clubs served by this BGCA affiliate, as in youth development organizations generally in the United States, Western Europe, and Australia (Cotterell, 1996), membership declines significantly during adolescence.

The present research was designed to evaluate those programmatic efforts and to examine psychosocial processes that, in turn, can inform program design. Although research on urban girls has increased recently (Leadbeater & Way, 1996), the number of studies remains quite small, and few have focused on youth development organizations. In this article, these ways in which theory and research on self-esteem, conceived broadly, can inform these change efforts are considered. As in most areas of inquiry, the translation of research findings into programmatic interventions presents challenges. Research on early adolescent self-esteem more often than not has focused on global self-esteem (DuBois & Hirsch, 2000; Hirsch & DuBois, 1991), and even when more delimited constructs have been investigated, they are still fairly abstract. Those actually working with youth, by contrast, need insights directed toward specific, concrete activities.

A challenge of a different sort is related to current approaches to self-esteem change efforts. Those intervention strategies tend to focus narrowly on cognitive behavioral techniques (DuBois & Tevendale, 1999) and have been criticized for emphasizing cognition over achievement (e.g., Damon, 1995). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis indicated that primary preventive self-esteem interventions using that approach are not very effective (Haney & Durlak, 1998). The clubs, for their part, are unlikely to adopt structured behavioral interventions in toto. They have a broader developmental focus, and their work does not emphasize highly scripted techniques. Nevertheless, they consider strengthening girls' self-esteem to be an important objective. An alternative framework therefore is needed to understand and guide the kinds of change efforts that might be undertaken.

Developing a working conceptualization of the ways in which the clubs can build the self-esteem of early adolescent girls is the focus of this article. The approach employed is ecological, using the metaphor of the Boys & Girls Club as a home to situate the self in a person/environment context of special salience to urban girls. Several strategic issues in program development are then considered.

RESEARCH SITES AND METHODS

Findings are reported from the first year of the research, which focused on four clubs, two of which served predominantly African American populations and two of which served predominantly Hispanic populations.¹ The neighborhoods where the clubs are located have high rates of poverty and violent crime when compared to other local community areas. All four communities rank in the poorest 35% of communities in the city, with one community being in the poorest 10%. All but one ranks in the top one-half of community areas in terms of rates of violent crime.²

Overall, this research project made use of multiple methods, including ethnography, survey research, and structured interviews. The qualitative data reported in this article come from the ethnographic field notes. Research staff were at each of the four clubs for 3 to 10 hours

¹Ethnic composition data were as of June 1998. During the course of the research, it was discovered that one of the Hispanic clubs was currently, at least for adolescents, 50% Hispanic and 50% African American.

²To protect the anonymity of the clubs, citations for these figures cannot be given.

per week for 7 months. Each site had a separate research team, which consisted of two undergraduate students and one graduate student. Each member of the research team functioned as a participant-observer in youth activities and had numerous conversations with youth and staff about club life. Each researcher completed detailed field notes after each visit, which were reviewed by another graduate student with experience in qualitative methods. The principal investigator (a community and developmental psychologist) met weekly with the graduate students to review and interpret field notes and to identify issues for further assessments. The principal investigator also examined archival documents and interviewed club directors, executives at the regional affiliate headquarters, and an outside organizational consultant.

In addition to informal conversations, a structured, 45-minute interview was conducted with 112 youth, selected randomly within site (club) and gender. As part of this interview, youth were told that “some children have described the club as a second home to them. Others do not seem to think of the club as a home,” and were asked whether they would describe the club as a home to them. If they responded affirmatively, they then were asked “What makes it feel like a home to you?” Responses were coded into several categories, all with adequate interrater reliability (Deutsch & Hirsch, in press).

The research focused on girls 10 years of age and older. Among those girls, 87% were in early adolescence (ages 10 through 15 years), 79% received free lunch at school, and 63% had experienced a family death during the past year.

The research team provided a written evaluation of year one of the gender equity initiative to the director of the initiative, executives at the regional affiliate headquarters, and an outside organizational consultant, with follow-up oral discussions. Those individuals also were given a copy of this article.

MAKING THE CLUB A HOME

In listening to the voices of youth, the ethnographers at the clubs were struck by the use of the language of home and family in describing the clubs. Many girls spontaneously called the club their “second home” or their “home away from home.” In the formal interviews of 112 youth (both boys and girls), approximately three-fourths indicated that they considered the club a “second home.” Yet, little attention has been paid as to what the term *home* means to urban girls and what the significance and conceptualization of a home-place is for them. Can the creation of a home-place be linked to the development of a valued self in adolescence? Is the idea of creating a “home” of particular importance in the transition from girlhood to womanhood? What are the elements that make a setting feel like a valued home, and what are the ways in which these elements can be figured into the design of successful youth programs and organizations?

The remainder of the article addresses these questions and elaborates the meaning and significance of the club-as-home. Within this context, consideration is given to understanding the potential impact of the clubs, and the gender equity initiative, on the development of self in early adolescence. The analysis begins with a review of previous work in the area of place attachment. Next, initial qualitative findings from the ethnography are presented regarding factors that enable the clubs to be experienced as homes. Interview data revealed that 66% of youth who considered the club as a home explained their response by referring to positive interpersonal relationships at the club (Deutsch & Hirsch, in press). Accordingly, the distinctive nature of relationships at the club with peers, adult staff and volunteers, and siblings as revealed in the field notes will be discussed (see Deutsch & Hirsch, in press, for some of the interview findings). Consideration is given also to the opportunity for girls to express their “voice” at the clubs, because of both its developmental

importance (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992) and its implications for the future of the gender equity initiative.

This report most appropriately is considered exploratory research. The focus is on integrating diverse, previously unrelated bodies of knowledge with initial qualitative findings. Bridging several levels of analysis, the objective is to help build the conceptual foundations for new theory construction and hypothesis generation regarding adolescent development in youth development organizations. For practitioners, the goal is to provide an alternative lens for viewing youth programs and to suggest strategic directions for organizational change.

Place Attachment

Scholars from a range of disciplines have considered the ways in which people are attached to particular places (Altman & Low, 1992). Key to the concept of place attachment is the idea that an individual forms a bond with a particular space over time, transforming that space into a “place.” A place is a physical space that is imbued with meaning for an individual and to which an individual has an emotional tie (Rubinstein & Parmelee, 1992; Sime, 1986). Attachment to a place has been posited to promote the development of social identities and self-esteem through the provision of rewarding activities and relationships, and linkages to social institutions and culture (Altman & Low, 1992).

The literature on adolescent place attachment has focused on either private spaces, such as woods and bedrooms, or on large, shared public spaces such as areas within a World’s Fair (Chawla, 1992; Cotterell, 1993; Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Marcus, 1992). The Boys & Girls Clubs do not fit into either of those categories. The clubs are not a lake to which youth retreat when they want to be alone, nor are they random spots that youth have coopted as a place to gather.

For most youth, the club is a “second home.” In choosing the term *home* to describe the club, youth are insinuating a very special attachment. A home is more than a place. If a space is transformed into a place through personal meaning, then a place is further transformed into a home through characteristics that imbue it with heightened personal significance. Although each person may have a number of important places, there probably are far fewer places that could be described as home.

The potential of the club to serve as a home-place for urban girls could reflect several important social dynamics. African Americans and Hispanics, particularly those from impoverished backgrounds, have strong linkages with their extended family (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, in press; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1996; Taylor, 1996; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994; Wilson, 1989). Ties to kin provide important sources of social support and are a prominent feature of the social ecology. It is likely that youth spend significant amounts of time in the residences of strongly linked kin, which can come to be considered second homes. Given this culture and probable personal history, low-income minority youth could be especially open to the idea of the club as a home-place. These processes have the potential to be even more important for girls than for boys, given the prominent role that females play in maintaining social networks over the life course (Di Leonardo, 1987; Stack, 1996).

Pastor et al. (1996) have argued that poor urban girls search for places that they can make into a home. Such a home-place would include a comforting and safe environment as opposed to the constricting environments they might find elsewhere, a space for resistance against constraining social and political norms, and a place to develop in relationships with adults and peers from diverse backgrounds. Key to the Pastor et al. conceptualization of a

home is the idea of a place where girls can be connected to each other and to their inner selves.

A home-place could be particularly important to adolescent girls' development because of the relationships that unfold in that setting. Theories of female psychology indicate that girls develop more relationally than do boys, placing greater importance on interdependence and connectedness (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1990). If the home is seen as a place for support, nurturing, and "girl talk" (Pastor et al., 1996), it becomes a place for the types of interrelationships important to female development. If adolescent females are seeking places receptive to their own ways of developing that will foster connections integral to their sense of self, then the creation of a home-place is one way to achieve that goal.

Girls also have the potential to be more attracted than boys to the idea of a home-place because of the added meaning of home for girls. Because of the social construction of gender in our society, many girls grow up seeing women as the primary homemakers in their own lives and with an idea of home as a female construct. Girls who also want to have a career thus are faced with a dual responsibility. Their awareness of the several life domains that their lives are likely to encompass (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994) might lead them to desire a home-place that will enable them to explore and integrate a variety of possible selves. The clubs have the potential to be a place for that process to unfold through the varied activities offered to girls.

Peer Group

Based on previous theory and research, as well as initial fieldwork conducted as part of the present investigation, there are some specific aspects of the club-as-home that seem especially important. One such element involves the exceptional potential of the clubs as a setting for enabling positive peer-group interactions.

The peer group becomes increasingly important as a context for the articulation of self in early adolescence (Cotterell, 1996). The clubs provide girls with a home-place where they can develop and nurture friendships. Girls generally come to the club as a group and participate in many of the same activities. Camaraderie is fostered as girls participate together in sports, psycho-educational programs, and social events (e.g., sleepovers, skating, "girls' night out on the town"). The club also provides girls with a safe space where they can talk informally and simply "hang out" with each other and with boys. Many girls stated that they prefer to spend time with their friends at the club, in contrast to those friends who do not come to the clubs, because they "know them well," they are "trustworthy," and "they are like family."

BGCA clubs distinctly are suited as a setting for friends. The club clearly has the space to accommodate many more friends than does the familial home. It is a much safer home-place than can be found on many city streets, especially for large groups of youth who are likely to attract the notice of gangs. The club enables friends to be together, whereas the organizational structure of many schools for early adolescents can impede the formation and maintenance of friendships (Hirsch & DuBois, 1989).

The clubs accordingly provide a setting in which peer friendship groups could have an especially powerful influence on the development of self. Early adolescent peer groups contain a reservoir of energy. That reservoir has the potential to be tapped and channeled into diverse activities, promoting the process of identity exploration. In contrast to gangs, the focus can be on positive, productive activities and identities that are viable over the long term in the larger culture.

As girls' experiences at the club appear to be mediated to a substantial extent by the peer context, the strength and stability of their peer groups can make or break club programs. At one club, for example, the only program for older girls disintegrated, due mainly to a conflict that arose within the clique of girls that constituted the program's participants. On the other hand, this same club had a successful early-adolescent program that was working well largely because its participants were members of a stable clique who had long-standing ties from early childhood. It is not always easy, nor desirable, for peer groups to continue unchanged (Dunphy, 1963); they can stagnate over time. Indeed, girls frequently expressed a desire to meet girls from other clubs. If clubs are to remain viable home-places for girls as they grow older, they will need to help peer groups provide stable support, manage inevitable conflict, and permit new relationships.

Ties to Adults

Adult staff and volunteers are important members of this home-place. Studies of adolescents at risk for early childbearing, academic failure, or delinquency have shown that the support of a teacher, counselor, coach, or other adult outside the immediate family can contribute to better outcomes, such as reductions in pregnancies, higher school retention rates, and lower rates of involvement in criminal activities (McLoyd, 1990; Musick, 1993; Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993; Rhodes, 1994; Rhodes, Contreras, & Manglesdorf, 1994; Rhodes & Woods, 1995; Sampson, 1992). In reviewing the few longitudinal studies that have followed resilient children into adulthood, Werner and Smith (1992) identified the presence of positive role models and alternative caregivers from the extended family and the wider community as a powerful protective factor for girls.

Relationships that the girls developed with staff contributed to their self-confidence. When asked for an example of what makes her feel good at the club, Lisa³ replied:

Carla [female staff member] always makes you feel good even when you are messing up. Like she has this dance activity, and I wasn't doing the moves right, but she kept telling me that I was doing good. And that made me feel good. I wanted to keep trying them.

Lisa experienced Carla's support and persisted in an activity. Similar to this, Shaleka said her club affects girls in a positive way,

because there are lots of good female role models here. Vanessa [who coaches Double Dutch jump rope] makes us put effort into things and motivates you to do things.⁴

Shaleka related that Vanessa made girls who were late run 10 laps and that the girls do so now without even being told. Over time, these girls are likely to achieve increased mastery and satisfaction, which are solid building blocks for self-esteem (Harter, 1999).

The emotional dimensions of these bonds are quite important to girls. At another club, the female staff member Karina was lauded by two 11-year-olds, Celia and Roberta.

Celia: You feel at home here. Karina can tell when you are having problems.
Roberta: Yeah, she can see it in your eyes. She just knows. And when you come back after being on vacation or something, Karina looks for you and welcomes you back.

³All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

⁴Double Dutch is a very popular form of jump rope that typically involved doubling over a long rope. Both pieces were swung rhythmically at the same time. A single person jumped inside, often performing different motions (e.g., turning around on one foot), while those swinging the rope often sang a song.

Staff are a source of guidance to girls on ways in which to deal with problems and develop self-esteem. As 11-year-old Sheila told us,

Whenever I have a problem, Miss Annie is there to solve it for me. She is there to help you solve your problems. ... [We] talk about difficulties we'll go through as we get older. [She] tells us how we should feel about ourselves and our self-esteem.

Another 11-year-old, Raquel, told of how her relationship with Miss Annie provided a foundation for on-target guidance:

She's fun and she understands what I go through. She knows about what I do, how I do it, and how I act. She tells me how to grow up.

Organizational characteristics of the clubs, however, present challenges to the formation of close bonds between early adolescent girls and staff members. One issue concerns the amount of quality time that a staff member feasibly can spend relating to girls and planning meaningful experiences for them. These four clubs are fast-paced environments in which staff have a great many responsibilities. Unless time is built into the schedule specifically for the purposes of attending to girls' needs, they can be neglected.

Staff turnover is another concern. As occurs commonly in youth development organizations (McLaughlin et al., 1994), many of the staff had been working at that particular site for only 1 or 2 years. Some currently were earning a degree or, especially if they had been in the human service field for years, wondering whether they should move on to higher-paying positions. Staff turnover can disrupt bonds that have formed. Celia, who has been a club member for 10 years, complained that all the "good staff" had left. She defined good staff in terms of their ability to connect with the youth, those who "would talk to kids, give help but with a sense of honor ... [they] formed bonds with kids over time ... and role models came out of those bonds." Dominique, who has been at another club for 10 years, also expressed a feeling of loss with staff changeover: "They used to have good staff here, but now ... well, they're still good but it used to be more."

Not having enough time each day to form bonds with girls, or not working at a site long enough for those bonds to develop fully, can have negative repercussions for girls. Staff were aware of the time needed to invest in developing the girls' self-esteem. As one female staff person put it,

Helping girls get good self-esteem doesn't just happen in the hour or two that you meet for group. It happens when you see them hanging around here all the time. It's knowing the girls for a while and knowing what's going on with them. My motto is to catch them doing something right and let them know about it.

This observation would be consistent with findings from an evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters that indicated that the effects of mentoring grow stronger over time and that relatively short matches can lead to negative outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, in press). As adult staff come and go, there is a need to determine ways in which new staff can continue to make the club a home-place where different aspects of the self can be nourished and supported.⁵

Siblings

One way in which the club functions as a home to girls is as a place where they can begin to explore "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). One such role, historically of

⁵It certainly would be helpful to provide higher salaries, but that is not an easy task. The research team repeatedly heard from executives at headquarters that salaries had been raised substantially, whereas staff repeatedly pointed to inadequate pay. Each group could have a point.

importance in African American communities (e.g., Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1996), is that of caring for younger children. Several girls who described the club as home mentioned specifically that they enjoy helping younger members. Field notes included numerous examples of sibling-type and parental-type interactions between older and younger children, including guidance in an activity, helping with homework, directing a child to the proper room, and comforting an emotionally upset child. Although many youth who attend a club do have actual blood siblings who also attend, even those who do not can develop sibling-like ties with other youth. For girls, this can mean acting as older sisters and developing confidence in their own abilities to take care of, and provide guidance for, younger children. This can provide younger girls with older girls who care about them and who can be good role models and mentors for their development. These sibling-type relationships appear to provide self-esteem building tools both for younger and older girls.

Girls' Voices

Of critical importance in the literature on girls' self-esteem is the issue of girls' voice. Some studies have claimed that girls begin to lose their voices at adolescence (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), whereas other investigations have found that any loss of voice applies only to White, middle-class girls and not to minority and urban girls (J. Taylor et al., 1995; Way, 1998). Whether or not urban girls lose their abilities to express themselves at adolescence, having a place where they feel listened to and where their opinions are valued is important. Pastor et al. (1996) emphasized that home is a place for girls to vocalize their thoughts and feelings in the safety of communal support. To be such a home, it would appear important for the clubs to be a place where girls are allowed to express themselves in a myriad of ways.

One example of voicing is having an impact on the activities at the club. The realization that they helped make the club better could have benefited girls' self-esteem. Lisa appreciated such opportunities: "Sometimes the activities are good because you can help others or say stuff to change things in the activities." Jackie and Celia were proud of their input into club activities: "We are really the ones that helped start a lot of these programs and stuff. We helped make money for the club and everything." Angela related that "[the club] makes us feel that we are part of something."

If the term *voice* is expanded to include a variety of aspects of the self that girls need to express, then the clubs can provide a safe place for this expression via different activities as well as a general atmosphere where girls' opinions are listened to and valued. The Smart Girls program for girls 10 and 11 years of age, for example, met weekly to discuss a variety of topics including health, self-esteem, financial planning, and such, all aimed at providing girls with skills that they will need to develop into healthy women. The girls were encouraged to speak honestly during the sessions and were reminded that anything said during the session was not to "leave the room." By giving the girls an opportunity to talk openly with each other as well as with the woman who runs the program, the club provides the girls with a place to use their voices and be heard within a supportive environment. In addition, activities in clubs such as Double Dutch, service clubs, and art, allow girls the freedom to experiment with and express various facets of their selves. The voices that clubs are helping to maintain are not only the girls' physical voices but a variety of aspects of self that can contribute to an overall sense of positive self-esteem.

Unfortunately, the clubs do not always realize their full potential in providing desired activities for girls, which diminishes their ability to provide a valued home-place. For example, girls enjoyed the sports activities that were available, but they noticed a gender discrepancy in sports programming. Amy noted, "Boys always get the gym. The boys tell us we can't play, and the staff says it's up to them." When asked whether she was treated better, worse, or the same as boys at the club, Lisa replied, "I think girls are treated better,

except for sports that is ... guys get more gym time.” At a different club, when asked how the club affected girls, Celia noted, “There’s no basketball for the girls, only the guys.”

Basketball provided the major draw for adolescent males at the four clubs. Tournaments and regular games for boys drew a great deal of energy into the club. Girls at this age had no activity that drew such enthusiasm and numbers. Although girls enjoyed groups designed specifically for them, these groups were not run consistently at all four clubs, nor were they able to accommodate more than a dozen or so girls at a time. Double Dutch, a popular activity, was offered only at one club site. The girls have expressed repeatedly a desire for more activities geared to their interests, such as volleyball, drama, and modeling, which might make the clubs more of a home-place for development of the self. The clubs do not always respond positively to these requests, sometimes because of limited staff and funding.

STRATEGIC ISSUES IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Based on the preceding conceptualization, several strategic issues in program development can be identified. It is important to anticipate and plan for how to build on initial successes, as well as how to respond to likely difficulties, as the change effort unfolds over time. Whereas the previous section of this report focused on the activities and experiences of girls, attention is now directed toward ways in which staff present opportunities and constraints for strengthening programming for girls.

Girls’ Voices and Staff Responses

The gender equity initiative was designed in part to give girls a voice in new program development and the redesign of clubs. This intention was evident in documents from the ad hoc planning group at “headquarters” (the central office of the regional affiliate), in grant applications to fund the project, and in interviews with headquarters executives. As a central thrust of her efforts, the director of the girls’ initiative formed a council of girl members across clubs to help set the direction for new programs. The initial priority for the girls’ council was to help develop the program for an all-clubs girls’ conference. Reflecting the importance of self-esteem to the clubs, the conference was titled, “Girls: How do we challenge them and help them build self-esteem?” The council played a major role in developing the agenda for the conference, which was attended by more than 200 girls. The presentations were designed in part to introduce girls to a variety of potential program possibilities and to encourage them to lobby in their clubs for new programs that addressed their interests.

The ultimate success of this effort to empower girls within the clubs is far from clear. Providing girls, or anyone else for that matter, with an effective voice is not a simple task. Girls, themselves, often have little experience or skill in articulating their desires with powerful adults. Some evidence for this was found in fieldwork at the clubs. Several instances were documented of adult group leaders asking unsuccessfully for input from girls. For example, the women who led a girls’ group at one of the clubs frequently asked the girls, “What activities would you like to have?” The girls often were silent or responded by saying, “I don’t know.” Often, simply asking is not enough to elicit genuine voice, or any voice at all. Moreover, even if greater skill is developed in soliciting girls’ voices, there is no guarantee that anyone will listen responsively to them. Other investigators, as well, have recognized this danger and warned that such efforts can backfire if adults are not responsive to girls’ voices (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Way, 1998).

If the clubs are to provide a meaningful place for girls’ voices, significant staff training likely will be needed to ensure that girls are heard. Empowering girls to become effective participants in club decision making is a more complex enterprise than the headquarters

group has acknowledged. Furthermore, resources will be needed to provide for initiatives proposed by girls.

Girls and Staff: Reciprocal Developmental Needs

Sarason (1972) has argued that staff will not function optimally, especially over the long term, if they are not in an environment that sustains and renews their own professional development. According to this perspective, focusing exclusively on the needs of clients—in the present instance, girls—is shortsighted. Providing for the professional development needs of staff will generate new human capital that can be recycled in the organization and turned to the needs of girls. These principles indicate that a focus on the reciprocal developmental needs of girls and staff will do much to enlarge the ways in which clubs can serve as home-places for girls.

One strategy for accomplishing that objective would focus on staff interests and ways in which those might be parlayed into new girls' programming. In this approach, staff would identify activities that they are excited about, and that excitement in turn would attract girls and motivate their engagement. Successful programming of this type should include the input of girls so as to build on the intersection of the two groups' interests and to allow both groups to feel invested in the process of planning activities.

Such a strategy was quite effective at an exemplary middle school identified in a national study by Lipsitz (1984).⁶ Despite serious political and financial obstacles, that inner-city school frequently was acknowledged with awards and honors. When students were asked why it was a good school, they unfailingly pointed to its safety and its independent study time (IST). The highlight of every week, IST was a schoolwide educational program designed by the teachers to encourage independent and group study based on personal interest and energies. Each day, Monday through Thursday, students attended four basic skill classes. Friday, the regular schedule was dropped completely, and students selected all their classes from among a rich array offered by the entire school staff, including administrators. The IST offerings were based on teacher and student interest and were quite varied: the Russian Alphabet, Scrabble, I Love a Mystery, Oceanography, Medieval England, Photo Club, Needle Art, Probability and Statistics, Writing Music, and such. Students responded enthusiastically to IST, stating that they could tolerate just about anything Monday through Thursday "because of Fridays."

As the preceding example illustrates, strategies based on soliciting and responding to youth's voices, and those based on eliciting staff interests, are not mutually exclusive. What seems most important is to generate a process characterized by more open communication, participatory decision making, and support for exploring each other's enthusiasms. That mutuality is seen as a hallmark of prototypical adolescent/adult relationships (Hamilton & Darling, 1989; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Roth et al., 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) and has been associated with greater adolescent ego development, identity development, and other positive dimensions of the self in adolescence (e.g., Harter, 1999; Hauser, 1991). Exposure to the interests that staff members enjoy is also likely to expand girls' views of their own possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

This transactional approach to the evolution of programs and the relationships embedded in those programs characterizes some of the most successful youth development organizations (McLaughlin et al., 1994). Those programs found a way to draw both on youth and staff interests. It is not clear from that research, however, how those organizations evolved over

⁶This was the Region 7 Middle School.

time to that point. So even if the clubs were to pursue those objectives, the route to achieving them remains to be determined. Moreover, beyond organizational change, additional funding likely would be required to provide needed resources.

In many respects, these issues are not unlike those faced by parents in youths' family homes. Parents need to be responsive to adolescents' increased need for individuation. For optimal parent/adolescent engagement, however, it is important to tap parental interests in ways that resonate with the new-found capabilities of their offspring. Allowing parents and adolescents to remake the home into a place that stimulates new modes of involvement with each other fosters emerging possibilities for reciprocal development of the self (Hirsch, 1996).

Need for Female Staff

If this initiative for early adolescent girls is viewed, in part, as developing the club-as-home, the gender of the adult staff needs consideration. In only one of these four clubs were women in either of the two principal leadership positions (club director and program director). Female staff are more likely to be interested and experienced in many of the recreational activities that attract early adolescent girls (e.g., Double Dutch) than are male staff, as well as more willing to discuss the intimate concerns of these early adolescent girls in psychosocially oriented programs. An initiative that aims to strengthen programming for girls and render the organization more gender equitable must give serious consideration to hiring more female staff with girl-consonant interests and to placing more women in leadership positions in the clubs.

CONCLUSIONS

A working conceptualization of the club-as-home as a vehicle for taking a fresh look at the ways in which youth development organizations can help urban girls develop during adolescence has been proposed. The clubs can provide a safe space to explore ideas, activities, and identities, stimulate creativity and self-expression, and develop strong ties to peers and adults. Particular emphasis was placed on the interpersonal relationships that girls form at the club. Relationships are fundamental to the development of self for girls (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1990). By expressing and embedding their emerging social identities in relationships at the club, the girls are able to make the club a personal community (Hirsch, 1981). Given the meaningfulness of those bonds, cultivated for many girls over years of regular attendance, the freedom from the threat of violence in their neighborhood, and a broad concept of extended family, this personal community attains a very special status as a home-place.

Attachment to the clubs also can help youth experience a sense of integration with the wider adult community. The club is often a well-regarded institution of long standing in the community. Youth members accordingly have made a home in a place that is both personally satisfying and socially approved in the wider adult world. This is not a trivial accomplishment, especially given the decline of many institutions in inner city communities.

In considering the implications of the club-as-home for strategic development of the gender equity initiative, a vision was sketched of the ways in which the clubs might fuse the interests of girls and adult staff to expand the developmental potential of the club for each. By drawing also on the potential energy of adolescent peer groups, this approach could unleash a new creativity for enriching club life.

An ecological perspective is useful for understanding the ways in which these types of activities, relationships, and meaning systems can be embedded in youth development

organizations. Although many of the activities and programs that currently exist at the clubs, or that are likely to emerge, focus primarily on work with small groups of youth, systems-level changes are needed for such more microlevel interventions to succeed and be sustained over time. There is a need not only to understand the self and self-esteem in context but to employ a similarly broad lens to appreciate the context of esteem-related interventions. There is a need not only for more programs but also for more settings that can be home-places for youth.

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